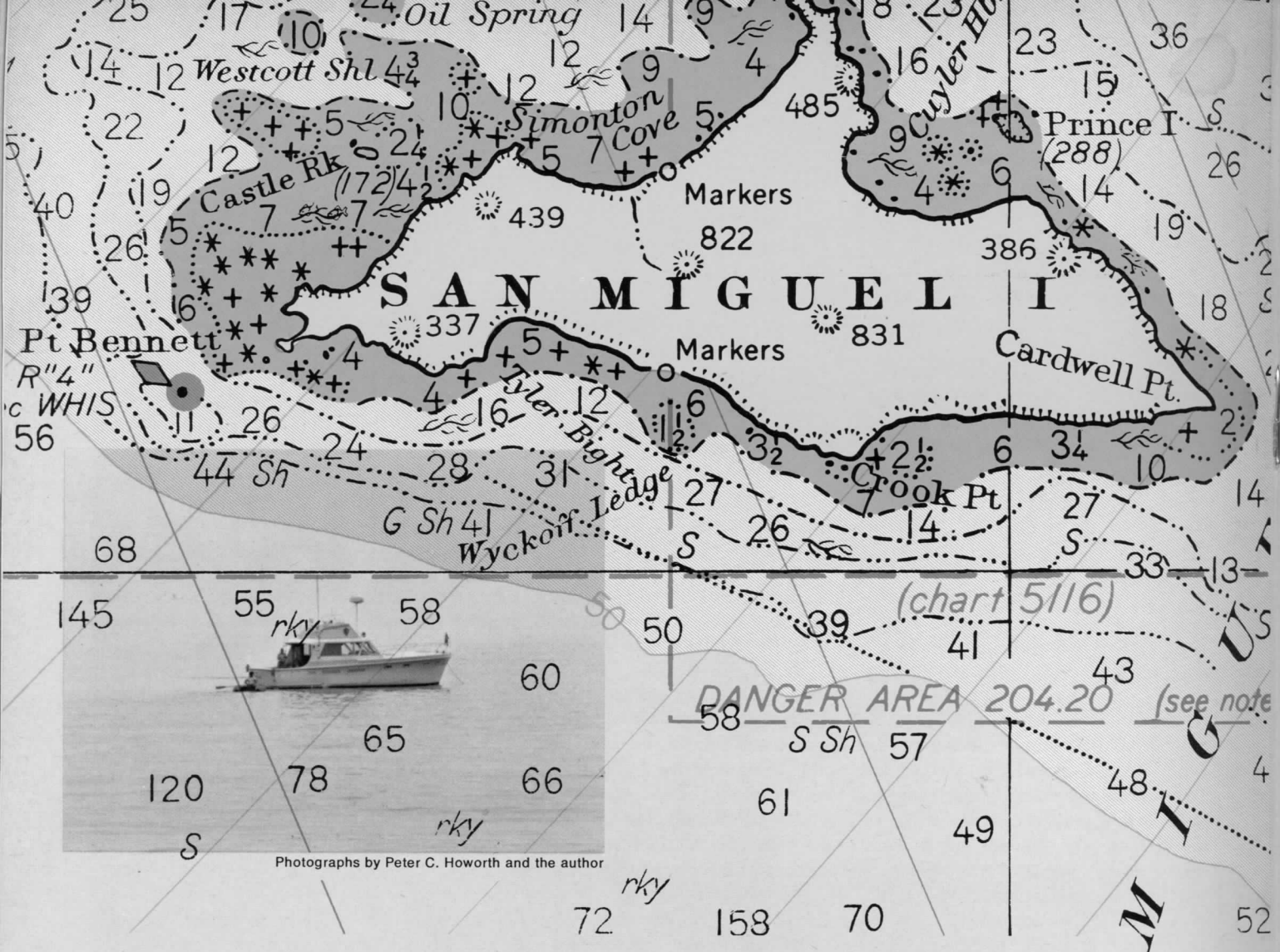


Westways

IN TWO PARTS: PART ONE APRIL 1970



Photographs by Peter C. Howorth and the author

CABRILLO'S LONELY ISLAND

By Irvin Ashkenazy

SAN MIGUEL, the most westerly of southern California's Channel Islands, is like a haunted house, deserted and desolate, owned by the wind. Here the bones of Indian civilizations lie buried in shifting sands, mingled, it is said, with those of California's discoverer, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. Here, in 1543, the Portuguese navigator

met his death. And here his spirit wanders amid the ghosts of sailors shipwrecked over the centuries on San Miguel's rocky reefs.

Some nine miles long and four and a half wide, the island has been administered by the Navy since World War II as a missile range and reference point for floating targets moored offshore. San Miguel's federally protected

wildlife is patrolled by the National Park Service. NPS rangers supervise its teeming herds of sea lions, harbor seals, fur seals and the great elephant seals, whose rookery on Point Bennett at San Miguel's western tip is one of the few left in the world today. Here, too, live a unique breed of midget foxes (*Urocyon littoralis*) found nowhere else in the world.

About twice a month, weather permitting, the National Park Service cruiser *Cougar* leaves her berth in the Channel Islands marina near Oxnard for a 140-mile weekend patrol to San Miguel Island and back. A few passengers with valid reasons for visiting the island—scientists, journalists, photographers and such—are sometimes allowed to sail with her, a courtesy of National Park Service Superintendent Donald M. Robinson.

THE SKY was a burnished, wind-swept blue the morning I arrived, the sparkling marina combed by a light breeze. The *Cougar's* two-man crew was astir when I strode down the little pier and climbed aboard. A figure in ranger green emerged from the cabin. It was the skipper, Bob Spurlock, a quietly affable ex-Navy man of World War II.

Presently Chief Ranger Herb Hunt arrived. Lean, casual, competent, he helped crewman Bruno Martinez cast off. The *Cougar* slid into the water. Her twin diesels throbbing, she headed for a spot off the end of a distant jetty.

Bob piloted the cruiser from the flying bridge atop the cabin roof. It was open to the sky and the view was good, so I climbed up to join him as we slipped past the rows of pleasure boats marshaled along their piers.

The California coast generally runs north to south from Point Sur to Point Conception, where it cuts abruptly east for some 50 miles. Along this south-facing shore lie such cities as Santa Barbara, Carpinteria and Oxnard, a northern backdrop for the four major islands that mark off an ocean corridor more than 30 miles wide. But this channel is far from a protected body of water. The northwest trades, chilled by the cold Japanese current, collide with the coast and whip around Point Conception like wind through a tunnel.

Bob commented that seas often broke clear over the flying bridge, drenching him at the wheel. Of course, he admitted, there were sometimes periods of zero visibility when he had to go below to steer the patrol boat on instruments.

I was suddenly aware that the jetty ahead had vanished and a bank of fog was advancing upon us. In a few minutes the sky, the marina had disappeared. We were engulfed. Bob cut

our speed to a slow crawl but remained on the flying bridge. Perched on its mast above us was the all-seeing eye of our radar antenna, rotating invisibly within its metal casing. Every so often Herb or Bruno would scurry down the ladder to the cabin and peer at the screen to make sure that all was clear ahead.

The *Cougar* curtsied to the groundswells that greeted her as we passed the breakwater and entered the channel. Damp and uncomfortable, I climbed down to find refuge in the cabin, balancing my way into the well-equipped galley. There I filled a cup of water and swallowed a Marezine tablet. If the seas got no rougher it would be enough.

A Coast and Geodetic Survey map was laid out near the cabin steering wheel. Across it in red ink the skipper had ruled a westward course. The line terminated in a small bight just this side of the sweeping curve of Adams Cove near Point Bennett. On top of the map he'd written, "ETA (estimated time of arrival) 12:30 P.M." He was optimistic.

The fog thinned as we sailed past on the Pacific side of East Anacapa, a rocky mesa rising some 300 feet out of the sea, crowned by a Coast Guard station. It is one of three strait-connected islets comprising the smallest of the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. Its powerful foghorn blared dolefully as we sailed by, angling our course westward into the open Pacific.

The northwest trades developed muscle as we put Anacapa behind us. Soon the high cliffs of Santa Cruz, the greatest of the Channel Islands, took shape in the distance, walling off the horizon on our starboard bow. The fog was gone and the sky was blue again, swept clean by the broom of the wind. The *Cougar's* flaring bow crashed through the seas at 25 knots.

Later Herb rotated shifts with Bob. He said he had been stationed in this area for only a few months, having been transferred from the Whiskeytown National Recreation Area near Redding, Calif., but he'd already experienced enough of the Pacific's wilder convulsions to be grateful for halcyon weather. Indeed the nicest thing about summer on these waters is that it comes when it's most needed, tempering the

tantrums of the everlasting winds and burning off the ocean fogs.

The diesels rose several decibels as Bob increased power against the rising wind and choppy seas. Our 12:30 P.M. ETA was out. Herb thought we might make our destination by 2 P.M. as we rounded Santa Cruz Island's most southerly point and cruised past the five rocks of Gull Islet. The sea, Herb said, was usually rough here, but that day it was peaceful.

"Wait till we go past Santa Cruz Channel," Bruno warned. The five-mile strip of sea between Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa islands (called the "Potato Patch" by local mariners) is often a minor maelstrom of colliding north and south currents.

But whatever turbulence it offered was hardly noticeable when we crossed it. The cruiser plunged through the seas and the 21-mile length of Santa Cruz Island fell swiftly astern. Santa Rosa Island, like Santa Cruz, a sea-bound cattle ranch, emerged from the haze. The miles slipped by. At Johnson's Lee the long pier of an abandoned Air Force base with its deserted complex of gray-green buildings came into view. Just beyond it lay South Point and the massive black hulk of a freighter that went aground, loaded with toys, in 1962. The coasts of the islands shown on the map are stippled with crosses, each of them marking what are called "obstructions," usually ships that have met disaster and remain as hazards to navigation, either above or below water. The greatest number of these crosses crowd the coast around the western end of San Miguel Island, mainly at Point Bennett, "The graveyard of the Pacific," as Bob described it.

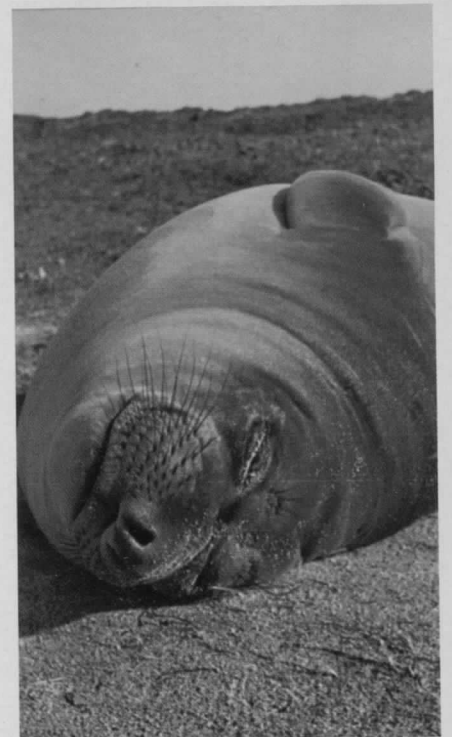
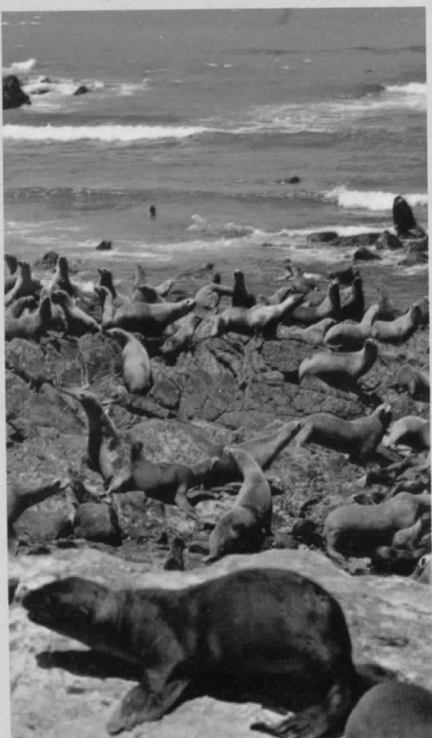
Both he and Herb agreed that the NPS could use a larger vessel to better accommodate the rough seas and the heavy loads sometimes carried. Not that our cargo was especially large on this voyage. Besides some extra provisions, the *Cougar's* cargo was primarily a large manila envelope stuffed with mail for Bob and Marlene DeLong. Bob DeLong, 27, has what is probably the loneliest job in California: official seal watcher on San Miguel Island for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It would have been even lonelier if he hadn't had the foresight to marry Marlene and



As an official seal watcher, Marty DeLong mans a blind (right), which overlooks Adams Cove. There, she spies a northern fur seal (upper left), also known as the "Alaska fur seal." This shy fellow is part of the first new colony to be established away from its natural habitats—the Pribilofs and the Kuril Islands



An observer can also see a tuckered midget fox (above), dozing in the brush, or an elephant seal cow (below), snoozing on her back. On the northwest end of San Miguel, sea lions cavort (lower left) on the much publicized oil-stained beach. The 125-yard-long expanse was likely blotched by a nearby natural seepage



bring her with him on a working honeymoon.

With Santa Rosa astern now, we crossed the few miles of San Miguel Passage that divide it from San Miguel Island. Seas exploded against the shore end of a reef thrust into the Pacific outside Cardwell Point at the island's eastern end; upflung curtains of spume raced like white horses along its quarter-mile barrier. Bob gave the reef a wide berth, bucking a 20-knot northwest wind.

San Miguel's hills and ridges, a mile off our starboard rail, were tan and treeless, striped with scarves of wind-blown sand. The wounds of erosion were everywhere filled with white dressings of sunlit dunes. We sped parallel to the coast, well away from the mile-wide band of brown kelp that lay between us and the beach.

IT WAS a far gloomier day in October, 1542, when Juan Cabrillo sighted these shores through the mists. He named the island La Posesión and made it his winter headquarters because, as his friar-scribe wrote, "There is a good port, and they are peopled." The island boasted two Canaliño Indian villages whose inhabitants, Cabrillo declared, "...eat nothing but fish; they sleep on the ground.... They live very swinishly; they go naked."

Why he chose fogbound, wind-blasted San Miguel, instead of the balmy accommodations of Santa Cruz or Santa Catalina islands, is a mystery. At any event, his stay was short. His log records that, "While wintering in this Isla de Posesión, on the third day of January, 1543, departed from this present life Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo... from a fall... on the same island... by which he broke an arm near the shoulder." His crew, it is said, buried him on San Miguel overlooking the harbor.

Cabrillo's successor, chief pilot Bartolomé Ferrello, renamed the island La Isla de Juan Rodríguez in his honor. But such are the ironies of fate and the usurpations of lesser men that today not one of Cabrillo's many discoveries is honored by his name. In 1769 Don Miguel Costansó drew up a chart of the island substituting his own first name for that of Juan Rodríguez, and so it has remained ever since. Cabrillo's grave itself has never been found.

AS WE slanted toward the coast through seas now free of kelp, the skipper sounded several blasts on the cruiser's siren. Its echoes had hardly died when a wiry figure in T-shirt and dungarees rose over a distant dune, hurrying toward the beach beyond. Behind him followed a slighter, distinctly feminine figure in blue shorts.

Our engines gentled to a low drone, our speed diminishing to a walk. We slid into the shallow cup of a small bight whose western lip concealed the grand sweep of Adams Cove lying just beyond. Herb and Bruno went forward and dropped anchor. It was nearly 3 P.M.

Skipper Spurlock climbed down from the flying bridge to join us on the afterdeck, watching Bob DeLong and his bride launch an aluminum cockleshell. San Miguel's resident seal watcher pulled toward us with inspired vigor. His passenger—known to her friends as "Marty"—was slim and suntanned. A schoolteacher not too long out of Purdue (where she'd met Bob), she is gifted with that invincible trinity: youth, good looks and brains.

Once aboard and the amenities over, the pair sat cross-legged on the floor of the afterdeck and devoured the contents of the big manila envelope Herb had brought them.

After the mail was read, I went ashore with Bob and Marty. The skipper had given us 90 minutes to explore the area. He himself couldn't join us. ("According to the rules, I can never leave the ship until she's tied up at her berth.") Herb and Bruno also remained aboard with him.

We climbed the sandy bluff behind the beach, finding footholds in crumbling rocks and in the wild succulents that hold the sand together. Despite occasional small avalanches along bare spots, we were soon atop a rolling plateau scalloped with dunes, arroyos and broad rivers of sand, which flowed down to the beach. Up here the winds took on added authority.

On the brow of a high bluff stood Bob DeLong's seal blind, overlooking the breathtaking panorama of Adams Cove. It was somewhat larger than a sentry booth, with windows on four sides. Its entrance in the rear was so low that one had to bend almost double to enter. A bench inside the weatherproof alu-

minum structure seated only two comfortably. From within, however, the entire length of the cove was open to view, aided and abetted by a spotting scope mounted on a swivel.

The most vociferous inhabitants of that splendid beach were the sea lions, their barking choruses continuing without pause, their sun-dried fur in surprisingly light shades of tan and brown.

Sea lions, however, are not DeLong's major interest. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service posted him here to observe the development of a unique phenomenon: the first new colony of northern fur seals—the valuable "Alaska fur seal" of commerce—to be established away from its natural territory.

Although bones of these northern fur seals have been found in San Miguel's Indian middens, and history mentions them taken in these waters during the early nineteenth century by Russian, English and American sealers, there is no evidence that they ever bred anywhere save on the Pribilofs, on two tiny Russian islands in the Bering Sea and on the Kurils off Japan.

In the summer of 1968, DeLong was one of a group of scientists led by Dr. Richard Peterson of the University of California who landed here to take a census of sea lion groups and to tag a sampling of pups. They were flabbergasted to find a harem of fur seals, some 60 cows and 40 pups, ruled by a 600-pound bull, established on the beach. Their long flippers and the unbroken curve from crown to nosetip identified them unmistakably: *Callorhinus ursinus* or to translate, "the bear with the beautiful nose!"

A wild, piercing caterwaul rode the wind. I turned to Bob. "Good Lord, what was that?"

He smiled, "That was the cry of a female *Callorhinus*."

I understood for the first time why the Russians call them "*kotiks*," which roughly means "sea cats," a name given them by Georg W. Steller, a German naturalist with the Vitus Bering expedition of 1741.

Bob pointed to a spot well above the tidal mark several hundred yards up Adams Cove. "The *Callorhinus* is that dark group."

At that distance the fur seals' darker color was the only difference I could discern between them and their sea

lion neighbors. That and the weird sounds they emit! But they are regarded as so rare and precious by scientists and government agencies that an important part of Bob's job is to keep the foot of man off Adams Cove. Every precaution is being taken to insure their continued residence on San Miguel Island, to encourage breeding so that one day, perhaps, San Miguel, like the islands of the Bering Sea, will teem with furry wealth.

"Don't you get tired just watching them day after day, week after week?" I asked.

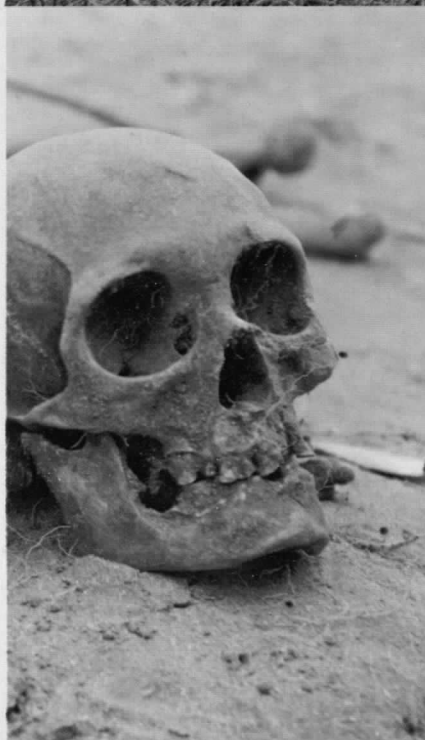
"Never." He turned from his telescope. "There's always something going on in the herd, new cows arriving and being rounded up by the bull, pups being born, sea lion interlopers being driven off, family fights..." He put his eye back to the scope. "Always something happening."

Many of these "happenings" are included in his daily record. Recently an outbreak of a mangelike skin disease among his charges has been a source of some concern. A cure is known, of course, but medical attention requiring human contact could easily frighten the animals away from the island for good.

Marty had long since returned to her house about 300 yards from the blind, across the narrow neck of the island, so I left Bob to his duties and continued on. I passed the house, a spacious, one-room, prefabricated cottage of aluminum and steel, brought there by Navy helicopters. I could understand Marty's resentment at an article, appearing in *Life* magazine last year, which referred to her honeymoon cottage as a "shack." It is far from that.

I turned west, sliding down sandy slopes to the level of Adams Cove, but well behind it. A few itinerant sea lions,

Death walks on San Miguel. The island's discoverer, Cabrillo, was probably buried here. A small cairn with a stone cross (top) is dedicated to him. Canaliño Indian skulls (center) have been exhumed by the wailing winds, while on a lonely swale overlooking the sea (right), the "king" of the island shot himself in 1942



adults and pups, a quarter-mile and more from the beach, stirred in alarm at our approach and turned to waddle back toward the sea. Signs of birth mingled with death on the great expanse of sand—stillborn pups, pups dead of injuries or birth defects, the pitiful residue of a pupping season that was still going on.

In a shallow slough on the opposite side of the narrow island a pod of bull elephant seals lay dozing their life away, huge seaborne blimps of tightly packed blubber, weighing from two to four tons apiece.

I looked for petroleum pollution here but saw no sign of oil anywhere on the beach or the rocks. Less than a mile away from where I stood was the 125-yard stretch of beach sensationalized as a death trap by the same reporter who denigrated the DeLong's island home. On some of the island's rocks and over the waters, there is, indeed, an accumulation of oil, much of it a tarry, viscous substance that congeals as hard as the rocks it clings to. But to blame it on the recent, much publicized, offshore well blowout seems, on observation, to ignore the evidence. The Santa Barbara spill is about 50 miles northeast by east of San Miguel Island. Could that leaking oil have floated against the prevailing strong northwesterly winds and current all the way to San Miguel? A more likely source of contamination is the natural oil seep known to exist on the ocean bottom just north of San Miguel's Point Bennett. Six other natural oil springs located just off Point Conception, due north of San Miguel, may be compounding the problem.

Such pollution is an old story in these waters. In his classic, *The Channel Islands of California*, published in 1910, Charles F. Holder wrote, "... old tars can recognize the vicinity of Santa Barbara Channel by the smell of asphaltum. It is found on the rocks of all the islands, oozing out of the bottom [of the Channel] at various places and drifting away. On the mainland coast, opposite Santa Rosa [Island], oil rises and produces a perennial calm; while north of Santa Barbara, on the More estate, there is a vast area of asphaltum. ... This asphaltum was of vast importance to the early natives. With it they stopped holes in abalone shells and

made dishes, and they employed it for all the purposes for which a white man uses glue."

From the *Life* story one got the impression that the short length of polluted beach visited by its reporter represented all of San Miguel's shoreline. Indeed, it is but a small fraction of the island's many miles of virgin beaches. And as for seal deaths due to oil, a Santa Barbara professional diver and sea lion trapper, Peter Howorth, who for years has observed local seal populations, notes that "the pup death rate on San Miguel this year seems to be less than usual."

I wandered the dunes, intrigued by a chorus of sea lions and the shards of ancient shipwrecks cast high upon the beach. My 90 minutes had stretched to over two hours by the time I started back, taking my bearings on the tall antenna masts of the two-way radio that provides the DeLongs with their only daily contact with the outside world.

When I reached the house I was greeted by Marty and a pair of foxes, gray with red ruffs and no bigger than tomcats. She offered them meat from a large abalone shell.

"A group of them come here every day to be fed," she explained. "Bob picks up a few dead pups off the beach and I cook the meat. They won't eat it raw anymore."

One of the charming little creatures moved to the abalone shell at her feet, selected a morsel and ate it right there. ("The fox," Charles Holder wrote 60 years ago, "is an attractive little animal, easily tamed, and I can imagine it kept as a pet by the Indians.")

The foxes are not the only visitors enjoyed by the DeLongs. Marty informed us that a geologist named Don Johnson had been camping on the beach at Cuylers Harbor for the past month and more. He'd visited them several times, following rudimentary "roads" built 40 years ago by a sheep rancher named Herbert Lester.

I bade Marty farewell. She was to depart herself in a few weeks for her teaching job in Santa Cruz, she said. Bob would stay on a few more months until the last *Callorhinus* took off on its winter migration. She sighed. "I just hate to leave. The seals, the foxes, all my animals. I'll miss them.

When I told people we were going to live on San Miguel Island, everybody said what a terrible place it was, how weird and wild. Well, it's been wonderful! I've loved every minute of it."

TWILIGHT shadows were stretching by the time we cruised past Prince Island, a 10-acre mountain peak upthrust from the sea, guarding the entrance to Cuylers Harbor. A lone figure in ragged shorts stood on the beach, watching as we dropped anchor. Bob Spurlock and Bruno recognized Don Johnson at once, having brought him here in the first place. We climbed into the *Cougar's* raft and rowed ashore.

"Who are you working for?" I inquired.

"Oh, myself and the University of Kansas. I'm doing research for my doctoral dissertation."

His tattered attire, unkempt hair, the crop of red whiskers porcupining his face, the geologist's magnifying glass dangling from his neck made him look more like a mad hermit than the scholar he was.

"What is your dissertation about?"

"The soils and geomorphology of San Miguel Island."

"Oh," I said.

"Need anything?" Bruno asked. "Some beans maybe?"

"No. But next time could you bring some gasoline for my lantern?" He fished some bills from his pocket, handed them to Bruno and trudged back to his two small tents in the cliff's shadow.

That evening aboard the *Cougar* we had the best steak dinner any man ever bought for a buck. Afterwards I stepped out on deck to taste the wind and observe the stars, glittering like spendthrift jewelry in a velvet sky. Somewhere a seabird called, crying plaintively.

"That's an oyster catcher," Bob informed me. "They holler all night."

He was so right. Later, awake in my bunk, I heard the oyster catcher sprinkling the night with melancholy. I listened until it was suddenly morning.

We rowed through a gentle, white-flowered surf back to the beach. Here I sampled Don Johnson's water supply, a spring flowing from an iron pipe thrust into the cliff. Some of the island's springs and streams are con-

taminated by salt or animals, but this silvery thread flowing from the rocks, sheltered by the only tree on the island—a sun-scorched, wind-ravished palm—is sweet and pure.

I followed Herb into the narrow mouth of a canyon, climbing a sinuous trail that clung to one wall. The canyon rose in a high V, some 500 feet straight up, its walls festooned with ice plant and vines hung with flowers resembling white morning glories, purple lantana and the yellow blooming coreopsis unique to these islands. We kept climbing and noted the broken timbers and ruined abutments built by Herbert Lester decades ago. This path had been a road down which he drove his sheep for shipment aboard the cattle barge that would wait below.

The path crested on the lip of a rolling meadow, which continued to rise in gentle undulations, its wrinkled slopes matted with uncut hay. Fence posts, hung with woven wire, still paraded the brown savanna. A forlorn sadness pervaded the quiet—a stillness deepened by the whispering wind and the taffeta rustle of dry grass beneath our feet. From the shadows of a shallow draw, a windmill rose, guarding a rickety springhouse, its vanes turning in idle futility.

Herb pointed. On a far-off slope stood a stone cross perched on a pedestal of lava rocks cemented together. I'd seen photographs of it often enough: Juan Cabrillo's monument.

We waded through a vast mattress of dead grass to the empty area on which it stood. It was smaller than its pictures made it out to be, and far less ponderous. Its two-foot cross of brown stone stood on a plinth probably not five feet high. I was sorry to note something that none of the photographs I had seen had shown: the top of the cross has been mutilated.

The Cabrillo memorial was erected here on the anniversary day of his death. The inscription read:

JOAO
RODRIGUES
CABRILHO

Portuguese Navigator
Discoverer of California 1542
Isle of Burial 1543
Cabrillo Civic Clubs Jan. 3, 1937
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